

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – August 16, 2020

Lectionary Readings: [Isaiah 56:1,6-8](#) • [Psalm 67](#) • [Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32](#) • [Matthew 15: \(10-20\), 21-28](#)

The Rev. Dr. William Heisley

A woman. A foreigner. Shouting. The Canaanite woman came at Jesus shouting at him, to him, for all the world to hear and see. Breaking every social rule in the book. A woman, not a man. A foreigner, not a Jew. Shouting, not quietly and not humbly speaking her truth.

So: Jesus ignored her. It sounds to me like Jesus was silent because he simply didn't want to deal with her. It sounds like Jesus's full humanity was on full view that day. The Jesus who says, "Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest," ignores this person who is so heavy laden that she breaks all the rules.

But the woman was persistent. She wouldn't take silence for an answer. She wouldn't let this holy man get away without chasing the demon out of her daughter. So Jesus, haughty Jesus, said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Not to you, foreigner. It seems like Jesus had his boundaries and he was going to keep them. He had a mission and he was focused only on it. Maybe he was focused only on misinterpreting his mission as God incarnate.

I must admit that sometimes I get tired of bending over backwards, trying to justify everything that Jesus says, everything nasty thing that he does. That is true today. Why would Jesus not talk to this person even if she were female and a stranger with messy manners?

When I step back from stories like this, I think I'm better able to clearly see Jesus and his mission and his love. We always have to remember that the stories of Jesus were told by many people and ultimately written down and translated and retranslated and edited by one person after another. And we have to remember that every one of them had their own idea of what Jesus really

meant, who he really was, how he really acted. And their own ideas controlled how they wrote down the stories we struggle to understand today, stories like this one.

At the heart of this story, though, there is something that I think is exactly what Matthew is trying to tell us. Be persistent. The woman didn't give up when Jesus ignored her. She came right up to him, and got down on her knees as if he were a mighty ruler and said, "Lord, help me." And with that bit of begging it would be perfect to end the story with something like, "And Jesus said, 'Rise. Your daughter is healed.'" Of course, he didn't. Instead, this: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Jesus says, in essence, "You want me to waste my blessing on you and your kid? My blessings are for Jews!"

But the woman persisted: "Yes, Lord." I know that I'm a dog and you don't bless people like me. "Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Ya gotta give me something, Jesus. Dogs need to live, too, and their masters feed them and love them. She persisted. Unmovable.

Now, I would expect any other person to become even more agitated at this. "Stop pushing me to do something I don't want to do!" But at this moment the breadth of the reality he's dealing with clicks for Jesus. He gets it. His humanity gives way to his divinity. The man Jesus, right there in front of the women, becomes the God Jesus. "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly."

The woman persisted. She was stubborn. Implacable. Obstinate. Hard to get along with. And...right in what

she was doing. Justified. Going before God standing in front of her, his feet firmly planted in the dust of the road, and begging for the mercy of healing. But not even for herself. Healing for her child. And she got it. Mercy. Compassion from Godself, even though she was pretty obnoxious about asking for it.

This whole issue of mercy arising from the noise of persistence is at the heart of who we are as Christians. Not only do we beg for mercy, over and over beg to be forgiven as we realize that we are broken and sinful and unclean. Not only do we pray “Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison,” “Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.” We also are called upon to give mercy. To be merciful. We – the Church of Jesus Christ – are to be his bearers of mercy to the world. And that can be an incredibly difficult, nigh unto impossible job at times.

Today’s Psalm is maybe my favorite. Most people say that Psalm 23 is the best, and I agree: it’s poetic and wonderful...and I’m tired of it. But Psalm 67 – “God, be merciful to us and bless us.” That’s where my heart is. Those words sound like an ancient poet had the same thoughts and feelings that the Canaanite woman had, but was better at making them beautiful. “God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth will stand in awe of him.” Chase the demon out of my daughter! Cure my cancer! Fix our environment! Kill the virus! Help us!

And maybe this: Unite us as one, vibrant, new congregation!

I asked Larry Reynolds to consider using a recording of a choir singing Charles Ives’ setting of Psalm 67 as our psalmody today. It was back at the end of the 1960’s that

I was introduced to Ives by singing this Psalm anthem in my college choir. Spectacular music. Written in the 1890’s. I hope you remember its haunting sounds from earlier in this service. I think it’s a gorgeous piece. But here’s a thing you might not realize: The choir sings for God’s mercy together, except, not quite. The Sopranos and Altos sing in the key of C Major. But the Tenors and Basses sing in the key of G minor. There is tension in this piece that reflects the tensions in the story of the woman and Jesus. There is tension that reflects the tensions through which we swim as two congregations combining to form a new, slowly immersing parish. Some of us sing in the solidly positive key of C. “God we know you are with us!” And some of us sing in the key of G minor. “God help us!” And most of us go back and forth, sometimes singing alto and sometimes singing bass.

But notice this: in the end of Ives’ setting of the Psalm, and at the end of the Psalm itself, there is sweet, peaceful resolution. “God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth will stand in awe of him.” It is enough. Enough to ask for mercy to come as the blessing of life itself, and it is enough, enough to now move on, to now live in the sure and certain promise that mercy is ours.

We all come before Jesus, at times feeling uninvited, unwelcome, too needy. But when we persist, he listens. We persist in being faithful, in being merciful, in waiting, in longing, in serving, not to earn his blessing, but because we know that Jesus will bless us. More important, we know that Jesus blesses us every day.

“Let all the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.” Amen.